

WINTER SUN TO MIDNIGHT SUN, Part 2

Stuart Letton

(Flying Fish 2015/2 carried the story of Time Bandit's passage home from the Mediterranean to Largs on the southwest coast of Scotland, with the excitement of force 10–11 (55 knot) winds south of Ireland. After just two weeks' rest Stuart and his crew were ready to push on...

Members who still have Flying Fish 2014/1 on their shelves will be able to follow much of this cruise on the chartlet page 217.)

A great spell of Scottish weather – other than the layer of hail on the deck at Tarbert – saw us tick off the west coast at speed, using the Crinan Canal to save some days waiting on weather to get around Sir Paul McCartney's Mull of Kintyre. The Caledonian Canal gave us the next shortcut. The Caledonian is staffed by some of the most helpful and friendly people you will meet on a cruise in Scotland. On a transit a couple of years earlier we'd fished one of the keepers out the drink after she took a header into the sea lock, and so were enjoying this passage with the compliments of the British Waterways Board. The lock keepers kept us moving through the Canal, which we finally exited at Inverness, poised for a quick passage up the North Sea via Orkney and Shetland.

So, there we were, trying to catch up a day or two lost to gales and happily en route from Inverness to Kirkwall in Orkney, when one of our many alarms went off. Given there was no smell of gas, no fire down below, no one had fallen overboard and the bilge was dry, it could only mean one thing – the engine had overheated. We hadn't heard that alarm for five years so it took a few minutes to identify. Having done so, our plans went out the window and, as we were just off Wick, we headed in to sort things out. After imagining the worst (such are my powers of diesel engine troubleshooting) the problem turned out to be a hole in the hose feeding the hot water tank, although it still took all day to find and fix it. At 1800 we finally left again, heading for Orkney and Kirkwall.



The sea lock on Crinan Canal



Lerwick Harbour

This route crosses the Pentland Firth, home to some of the UK's fastest-running tides, overfalls and other terrors of the deep. Following the pilot we set a plot leaving the Skerries 6 miles to the west and, with Mike and Diane in charge, Anne and I headed below for a snooze. An hour or two later the deck crew were a bit bemused as to why there was a line of breakers to our left in the middle of nowhere. All that was missing was the surfers.

These standing waves were about a metre plus, maybe 4–5ft in old money, ranked five or six deep. The only option was take them head on, which we did. A fair bit of bows leaping in the air and crashing ensued. Down below in her bunk, Anne barely stirred.

Our plan to tour Orkney was nearly scuppered by Folk Week – the island was mobbed, with not a room or, more importantly, a hire car to be had. Into the breach stepped Mike Cooper, PO for Orkney, who generously lent us his car for the day.

We then made another overnight dash, this time to Lerwick, to catch both the crews' flights home and more music in the famous Lounge. On Wednesday nights and weekends local musicians gather in the pub to play the night away on fiddles,



Ålesund

accordions, piano and assorted other instruments, each player a virtuoso in their own right. For me, Lerwick seemed like the culmination of all our efforts to get north since leaving Spain months and thousands of miles ago. Capsized boats, storms, rain, cold, broken engines – Lerwick seemed like paradise and, even better, it was bathed in sunshine. What's more, I was completely *disjaskit** (as they say in Shetland).

However, one does have to press on ... can't be hanging around marinas and harbours enjoying oneself, oh no! Instead we took off into the night to blast our way across the North Sea in freezing temperatures, with only the warmth from the seemingly dozens of oil rig flares to keep us from going blue with cold. The forecast was great for 48 hours, but then due to veer northeast which would scupper our plans of laying the Lofotens. Teasing us, it gave us a great night's sail, heading north and averaging 7.5 knots, only to have the wind die and veer putting both the Lofotens and our fallback objective, Ålesund, off the agenda. Not really having a fixed plan, and with a forecast of light, contrary winds for the next few days, we decided to make for somewhere interesting on the Norwegian coast. Anywhere was better than motoring 700 miles.



'Anywhere' turned out to be Måløy, where we discovered we were about a month too early for the Norwegians to either come out of hibernation or go on vacation. Not a mouse stirred. The streets, shops, cafés and pubs were dead. At £5.50 for a coffee and over £12 for a pint I can understand the cafés and pubs being closed, but where was everybody? It was a few weeks and late June before signs of life began to show. My theory is that they're all so busy working to pay for their ruinously expensive shops and pubs they stay indoors until their holidays.

* exhausted, worn out

Ålesund, our next stop is a pretty town. Big Brother was watching – well actually Son No.2, who spotted us on the harbour webcam and texted to check it was us on the pontoon. No escape! From Ålesund we were off into the inner routes, weaving amongst the exceedingly well-marked rocks and skerries. Our first passage was through the ‘intricate etc ... Stoplane Passage’, but all routes are well marked and, especially if you have a plotter, it is (with apologies to purists) just a case of joining the dots in your carefully way-marked route. We had been told that C-Map was the package to use, but throughout Norway we found that Navionics was spot on.

A succession of *Gjestbrygge* (guest pontoons) for £10 to £25 per night, and sheltered anchorages nestling amongst the jagged mountain scenery, took us to the foot of Europe’s second largest glacier, the Svartisen at the end of the Holandsfjord. Onward and northward, in now 24 hour daylight, we stopped every night in ever more stunning settings, often the only boat in town. Finally, three weeks after leaving Lerwick, it was midsummer’s night. At 0200 Anne insisted we get up to see the sun not go down. Standing in the cockpit in her skimpy night attire, Anne ooh’d and aah’d at the spectacle, only spotting as she headed back down below the 20 or 30 locals ooh’ing and ahh’ing as well. I presume it was at the midnight sun.

The next day we romped across the Vestfjord, which separates mainland Norway from the Lofotens, landing in Svolvær which was to be our base for the next few days’ cruising north and south to visit the fjords and secluded anchorages of the Lofotens.

Much of the way north I had been teasing Anne that Norway was pretty much like the west coast of Scotland, and that it was a long and cold way to come and see what we’d sailed and climbed amongst all our lives. However, the reality is that



*Svartisin
Glacier*



Stunning scenery all around

Norway delivers simply stunning mountain scenery on all horizons in, for us, great weather (with a few grey rain days thrown in to keep mass tourism away).

Our time in Norway was drawing to a close. It was a wrench to leave, but our daughter's July wedding and the need to make the start line of the 2013 ARC nearly 3000 miles away was sufficient catalyst to make the decision. We celebrated our northern lights experience with a dram at 68°N to the accompaniment of the Kintyre Schools Pipe Band echoing off the fjord walls, which drew quizzical looks from the nearby Polish and Norwegian boats. This drew a close to our Arctic adventure and we turned south for home, the ARC and ... stunning as Norway is, some warmth!



*The
midnight
sun*